



Navigating the Unique Complexities in Familial Trafficking

The following is a product of the Human Trafficking Expert Consultant Network (the Network) funded by the TIP Office. The purpose of the Network is to engage experts, particularly those with lived experience of human trafficking, to provide expertise and input on Department of State anti-trafficking policies, strategies, and products. The author has a range of expertise related to human trafficking, familial trafficking, marginalized communities, trauma and resiliency, education, and survivor leadership. Additionally, the author holds a Master's degree in Intercultural Studies with Children at Risk and a Bachelor's degree in Education.

In 2017, IOM estimated that 41 percent of child trafficking experiences are facilitated by family members and/or caregivers. Notably, governments and anti-trafficking stakeholders overlook familial trafficking, which is when a family member or guardian is the victim's trafficker or the one who sells the child to a third-party trafficker. The anti-trafficking field has identified and delineated the recruitment, grooming, and exploitation practices traffickers use in various scenarios of both sex and labor trafficking. Based on this knowledge, the field has adapted anti-trafficking efforts to support survivors in specific, appropriate, and effective ways. However, familial trafficking, which is unique and just beginning to be understood in the field, is difficult to identify because it takes place within family networks and victimizes children, many of whom are under 12 years of age, who may not realize they are victims. Because of this, the indicators for familial trafficking are different than indicators for other types of trafficking.

In these cases, the trafficker may begin grooming the victim at an early age, using their close proximity to take advantage of the child's developmental stage and inability to verbally express concerns or safety issues. One study estimates that the trafficker is a family member in about 31 percent of child sex trafficking cases. In these cases, the child's inherent loyalty to and reliance on the family structure make familial trafficking difficult to identify and challenging to prosecute. Harmful misperceptions about where and how familial trafficking happens, such as the belief that familial trafficking only occurs within neighborhoods, communities, or countries of low socioeconomic status, contributes to challenges to prosecution, prevention, and protection efforts. Addressing familial trafficking requires an interdisciplinary approach to ensure recovery of mental and physical health, trauma-informed investigation and prosecutorial efforts, survivor-led and -centered practices and interventions, and larger societal education and awareness.

When the family member is the trafficker, the exploitation is often normalized and accepted within the family culture, sometimes spanning generations. This normalization of exploitation may also occur when the familial trafficking is tied to economic and cultural factors, such as in some cases of forced child labor in agriculture. If another family member notices the exploitation of the child, there is a strong incentive to look the other way to protect the family, both physically and in reputation, from outside interventions. Family members entrusted with caring for the children are often the ones grooming, manipulating, abusing, and exploiting them. In many of these cases, children may simply have no other trusted adults actively engaged in their lives. They also may not have the physical and mental development to identify coercive tactics being used by an individual they have bonded with, trust, and love. Because children are dependent on their families for their basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing, they are often faced with having basic needs unmet or physical violence if they don't comply with the trafficker. The traumatic impacts are severe because children have little psychological recourse for protecting themselves from the trafficker, who may also wield significant power by nature of the familial relationship alone.

When the family member or guardian is the victim's trafficker, it may not be apparent that human trafficking is occurring, especially because the victim lives with or near the perpetrator. Whether the parent or guardian is the trafficker or sells the child who is then placed in the care of another trafficker, the trafficker is both that child's exploiter and caregiver. In either case, a missing person's report would not be filed, and



child protective services or other welfare agencies would not be notified. Because a child in this situation is often trained not to report what is happening, interactions with adults who might otherwise notice a problem or identify the child as vulnerable, such as teachers, neighbors, doctors, and other adults in the community, instead see the child as shy or failing to thrive. Furthermore, victims of familial trafficking might not be able to comprehend or identify with the indicators featured in most public awareness and outreach campaigns that share information on how to seek help. These campaigns typically target audiences who are much older than those exploited in familial trafficking. The reality is that abuse, pain, torture, and exploitation is the only existence these survivors may have known.

The impacts of familial trafficking, both visible and not, and subsequent needs of survivors are often severe and complex, and they can be exacerbated by the onset of trauma during key childhood developmental stages. When children experience familial trafficking, they may develop educational and social delays, physical health problems, and psychological disorders, such as complex post-traumatic stress disorder and attachment disorders. Survivors may encounter a large number of health indicators and somatic complaints due to having to endure trauma for a long period of time at an early age, including head, stomach, and body aches; throat and urinary tract infections; interrupted sleep due to nightmares and flashbacks; difficulty concentrating; asthma; and more. Survivors of familial trafficking have a range of responses to the traditional educational system: some are reported to have learning challenges, including illiteracy and processing challenges. Other children excel, whether because school is where they feel safe or because they have been conditioned to please adults in their lives or developed resiliency and survival skills early in life. Furthermore, familial trafficking situations may have prevented survivors from developing key healthy social skills, including how to make and maintain friends, relate to other children and adults, ask for assistance, and recognize their own self-worth. Having a family member as the main perpetrator and trafficker may also result in many victims feeling unable to speak about the experiences they endured due to the shame it may bring upon their families, communities, and themselves. Regardless of socioeconomic background, child survivors of familial trafficking situations often have limited avenues for resources when seeking assistance.

Frequently, service providers use the same approaches and resources for familial trafficking that are used for all types of human trafficking, which can be inappropriate and even harmful. Few resources have been developed to address the particularities of familial trafficking. The ways in which a service provider would engage with an eight-year-old child exploited by a family member will need to be different than when engaging with a child who has a safe home with a trusted adult. A child who has been exploited by a family member will mostly likely need services to address complex trauma, attachment, and severe exploitation. While awareness of familial trafficking is increasing, more research is needed.

Still, the specific and long-term needs of survivors of familial trafficking can be met in a variety of ways. For example, many children would benefit from having one-on-one support to develop an individualized program with the survivor and meet with them several times a week. Most importantly, age- and culturally appropriate comprehensive programs need to be developed with consideration of each unique survivor in mind. Positive connection, the freedom to experience developmentally appropriate activities, and even fun, sometimes for the first time, are healing elements that should be emphasized in these programs. Through programs with an increased focus on familial trafficking, survivors learn they are not alone in their journey and that someone is there to walk beside them through every step.

